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THE GRAEFF PRIZE ESSAY: 1867.

A N E S S A Y

ON

The Julius Caesar of Shakespeare,

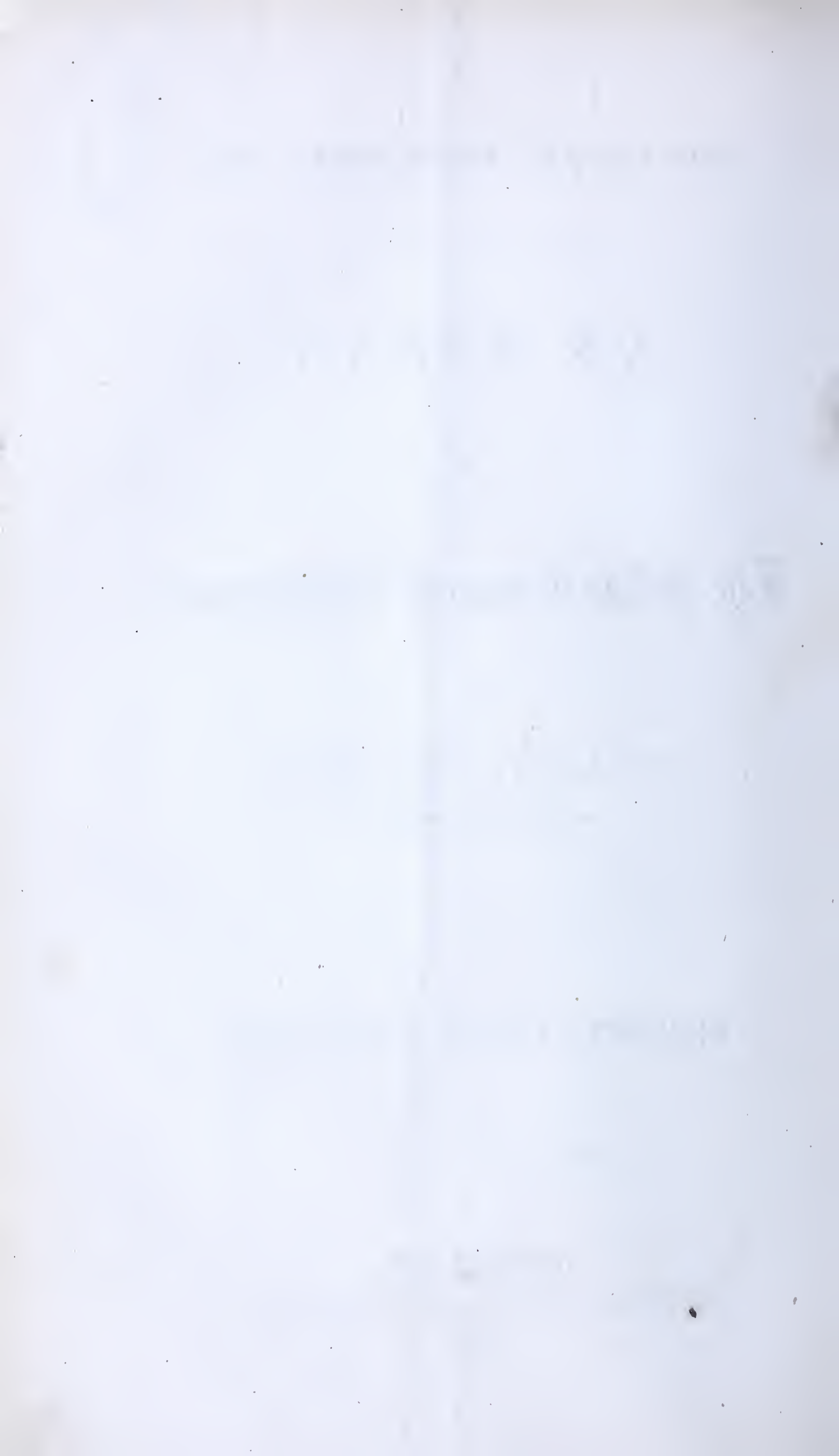
BY

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OF THE CLASS OF '67.

PENNSYLVANIA COLLEGE.

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Award of Committee.

GETTYSBURG, JULY 25TH, 1867.

PROF. EDSALL FERRIER,


Dear Sir:—

We have carefully examined the Essays placed in our hands, on The Julius Caesar of Shakespeare. While several are of great merit, and evince a knowledge of the subject, and skill in the use of the English Language, highly creditable, it is our judgment that the Essay signed "Ivanhoe," is entitled to the prize so generously founded by Rev. JOHN E. GRAEFF, of Philadelphia.

EDWARD McPHERSON,

MILTON VALENTINE,

Committee.



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The Julius Caesar of Shakespeare.

THE brilliant pageants, represented by the nobles at Kenilworth Castle for the amusement of Queen Elizabeth, perhaps, first gave inspiration to the latent genius of the immortal Shakespeare. The dazzling costumes of the nobility, and the flattering spirit of the court-followers, first suggested to this master-mind, the capabilities of the drama for representing life in all its varied forms. Though critics have been pleased to deny the presence of Shakespeare at that magnificent representation, when the great Dudley entertained the "Virgin Queen," it still remains within the limits of positive evidence, that he attended, at least, the frequent carnivals held there by the Court of England; and no evidence has yet been adduced, denying his presence on that occasion. It is very probable, therefore, that this representation at Kenilworth first taught him the fitness of the stage whereon to concentrate the varied scenes of human life. He there caught the true spirit of the Drama, and from that time forth he ardently persevered in developing the hidden energies of his soul.

History does not inform us what course he pursued

in the attainment of knowledge, but we have reason to believe that he enjoyed few advantages for a classical education. His contemporary, and intimate friend, Ben Jonson, tells us that "he knew little of Latin, and less of Greek;" and the few discrepancies in his writings prove that he had not the rigid and classical training of Jonson or of Milton. In a comparison between Milton and Shakespeare, it may be said that genius is characteristic of the one, whilst imagination is that of the other: one is the representative of Nature, whilst the other is an index of Heaven. Shakespeare is but another name for Nature, Poetry and Truth.

No writer has ever lived, who was a closer observer of human nature, who could rise so high above the language and feelings of the vulgar, and who was more true in delineating the various passions of the human heart. The versatility of his genius has never been equalled. He sometimes rises to the highest eloquence of the statesman and then immediately falls to the lowest punning of the cobbler. Such a distinct individuality has he fixed upon every character of his Plays, that no two are alike. There is no transition into a semblance of character, however close the relation of the actors may be. The dignity of King Lear is not lowered by the constant companionship of his Fool, nor does his Fool become elevated by the dignity of the King. In all his writings, Shakespeare has ever observed such a consistency in every individual, and yet has introduced such a variety of characters; and besides, has always

been so true to nature and to the human heart, that he must be ranked the greatest genius that ever lived.

2. The Tragedy of Julius Caesar is generally pronounced one of Shakespeare's inferior productions; but the reasons upon which this assertion is based are not clear. Its inferiority certainly does not arise from insignificance of characters, nor from any gross discrepancies in the Play. The movement is continuous and lively throughout, and the actors include some of the greatest men of the Roman world. Besides the impressive and vivid representation, it is an important fact, that no other of Shakespeare's Plays does less violence to historical truth. Its representation may work less upon the feelings of men than his other tragedies, but none can claim such a rigid adherence to truth as that of Julius Caesar. Therefore, if feeling be made the criterion whereby to judge the relative importance of his Plays, then Julius Caesar will rank sixth in the order of his tragedies; but if historical truth be made the test, then this Tragedy will concede no claims of superiority to any of his other works. In his six great tragedies—Othello, Lear, Hamlet, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, and Julius Caesar—the first four take precedence in point of pathos and terror; but in point of fact, the order is entirely reversed.

While Shakespeare seems to have exhausted all the capabilities of human thought and speech, and all the resources of pathos, terror and sublimity, in the first

five tragedies—the latter gives additional evidence of his inexhaustible genius in blending truth and novelty in such happy combinations. In fact, there is ground for the opinion that a special effort was made in the composition of this Play. The character and life of the Roman General made a deeper impression upon the mind of Shakespeare than any other personage, whom he has designed to represent. This appears evident from the frequent reference he makes to Caesar in many of his Plays. In *King Henry the Fourth* he alludes to him twice; once in *Henry the Fifth*; five times in *Henry the Sixth*; twice in *Richard the Third*; three times in *Hamlet*; at least five times in *Cymbeline*, and six times in *Antony and Cleopatra*. These frequent allusions constitute strong evidence that the “Mighty Julius” had taken a strong hold upon the imagination of Shakespeare, and furnish sufficient reason to conclude that this Tragedy was not meant by the author himself to be one of minor importance. But in order to show its conformity to the history of Caesar’s life, it is necessary to go more minutely into details.

3. In reading the history of any country, it is always well to inform ourselves first of the stand-point from which the historian viewed the subject. For instance, if we choose Lingard in reading the history of England, we should first know that he was a Roman Catholic, and that the Catholic doctrine is the central point of all his delineations. Or if Hume be preferred, it

should always be remembered that he was an infidel, and that he therefore either slighted or neglected altogether, all matters pertaining to religion. So in reading Julius Caesar, we should first know the design of the author, and the source whence he derived, and how he used, the materials in the composition of the Play. From its close analogy to a part of Roman history, we may safely infer that it was the design of Shakespeare to represent the life and times of Caesar in a true light. The whole Tragedy is but a compilation of historical facts, or a three years' history of Rome as a Republic, about fifty years before the advent of Christ. From its consistency with "Plutarch's Lives," we may know at once that he derived his materials from that source. The adherence is so rigid, and the words of representation so uniform, that the source cannot be mistaken. It is matter of special interest to examine how skillfully Shakespeare used this material, and how ingeniously he wrought it in the body of the Play.

The plot is laid at Rome. The scenes are enacted in the streets; before the Capitol; at Sardis, and in the plains of Philippi. The Play opens with the presentation of Flavius and Marullus, two tribunes of the people. It was at the time when the two great rival parties of Caesar and Pompey were contending for absolute power over the Republic. Caesar had just obtained a victory over the sons of Pompey at the battle of Munda, and a few commoners were rejoicing

to see his triumphal entry into the city. Meeting in a street of Rome, these tribunes, who favored the party of Pompey, inveighed against their joyousness, and went about to "disrobe the images of Caesar," which the commoners had "deck'd with ceremonies." In the second scene, the prosy Casca says:—"Marullus and Flavius, for pulling scarfs off Caesar's images, are put to silence." Now all this is in perfect harmony with the history of Plutarch. He tells us that Caesar, being incensed at their behavior, deposed them, and thus "put them to silence" by taking away that influence which they exerted in virtue of their office. Even the Feast of Lupercal, where the "decking of the images" took place, and where the crown was offered to Caesar, is most minutely described by both Shakespeare and Plutarch. The ceremonies of the Lupercal were similar to those of Lycæa among the Arabians. Antony, being a consul, also took part, in compliance with the rules of the festival. The ludicrous belief of the women; the presence of the sooth-sayer; the plaudits of the people; Caesar's "falling sickness," and the baring of his neck to the multitude—in fact all the minutæ of the pastoral feast are set forth in perfect harmony, both by the Historian and the Poet. The only discrepancy in the two accounts, is found in the number of times that Caesar refused the crown. Plutarch says that Antony twice "offered him a diadem wreathed with laurel," whilst Shakespeare personates Casca in saying, that Antony offered

him a "coronet" three times. Various omens of Heaven's displeasure; the wild and strange dreams concerning the conspiracy; the death of Caesar at the base of Pompey's statue, and finally, the many incidents in the battle of Philippi,—all these harmonize most wonderfully in the two accounts.

Notwithstanding this concurrence of the Tragedy with the history of Plutarch, it must not be thought that Shakespeare has exhibited all the incidents of Caesar's life and death. The Poet is sometimes charged with injustice on this account, but he has done his duty to Caesar as far as he knew it. The Play represents only the last three and a half years of his life; and for its historical defects in this period, two reasons may be assigned. The first reason will be given when we consider the actors of the Play; and the second reason for its defects, grows out of the very imperfect history which Plutarch himself has given of Caesar's life. There is no other instance in all his biographies where Plutarch has so signally failed. The idea, which he gives of the character of Caesar, is very imperfect and inadequate. Langhorne, who has translated his "Lives" from the original Greek, says:—"Plutarch has written the life of Caesar as a man under restraint; has skimmed over his actions, and left us none of those finer and minuter traits, which distinguish a man more than his most popular and splendid operations." This criticism is just, however harsh it may appear. If Shakespeare therefore

has done injustice to Caesar in the representation of his life and character, the charge must be attributed to Plutarch and not to Shakespeare.

4. In reading upon any topic, it is well to inform ourselves not only of the stand-point from which the author viewed the subject, but also to have a clear conception of the text or theme to which his remarks are directed. There can be no intelligent reading, when the reader has not a clear conception of the subject upon which he is reading. It may be for this reason that Shakespeare is not more universally admired. The names of his Plays are not always their subjects, and hence it is, that the design of the author is frequently misapprehended, and the unity of the Play not clearly seen. The subject of the Play under consideration is not Julius Caesar simply, but the tyranny and death of Caesar. The subject of Macbeth is temptation and ruin, whilst it was the object in King Henry VIII to please Queen Elizabeth. The moral lesson in King Lear is that of filial ingratitude, whilst England is made the hero in King John. Thus we see that amid the variety of Plays, there is also a variety of subjects and moral lessons, and a clear conception of the author's design in every representation is necessary to appreciate fully the beauties of the Play.

The tyranny and death of Julius Caesar is the central point, or the key which will admit us to the hidden treasures of this Tragedy. Whatever other incidents may be introduced, they are but radiations from this

focal centre. The unity of the plot consists in this uniform tendency to one single action. Even in the first scene, the subject is clearly set forth. The tyranny or cruelty of Caesar is evident from the language with which Marullus rebukes the joyous commoners :

“And do you now put on your best attire ?
And do you now cull out a holiday ?
And do you now strew flowers in his way
That comes in triumph over Pompey’s blood ?”

In the same scene, Flavius thus hints at the premeditated death of the tyrant :

“These growing feathers, pluck’d from Caesar’s wing,
Will make him fly an ordinary pitch,
Who else would soar above the view of men
And keep us all in servile fearfulness.”

In the second scene, the subtle Cassius “disposes the honorable metal of Brutus” to favor the conspiracy, and in triumph exclaims :

“Let Caesar seat him sure :
For we will shake him, or worse days endure.”

Thus the scheme progresses ; the conspirators give shape to their plans, and the language is more direct to the purpose, until in the third Act, the “mighty Caesar” falls at the base of Pompey’s statue, bleeding from twenty-three wounds. This was perhaps the greatest fall the Roman world had ever witnessed. Cicero has made a beautiful allusion to the few drops of blood that were left upon the base of the statue. He represents the conspiracy so cruel, and so heinous, that even the statue of Pompey shed tears of blood

over the fall of Caesar. The fourth and last Acts still keep up the interest in representing the natural consequences resulting from the murder of the tyrant, so that unity of action is preserved throughout the entire Play.

It is sometimes said that a tragedy should end with the death of the hero, because all interest is centered in him. This has been made a strict rule in the fundamental elements of tragical writing, but it is certainly not one founded upon good taste. A sense of propriety in the action, and a reference to the satisfaction of the feelings, should ever constitute the chief guidance of all tragical writers. It sometimes happens that the interest which was first centered upon the hero, is suddenly transferred to other incidents, arising from the peculiar manner of the hero's death. Thus Schiller, the German Poet, does not terminate his "William Tell" with the death of Gessler; because at the period when the tyrant dies, other characters are becoming so prominent in the play, that all interest is transferred to them. And Sophocles, the Attic Bee, does not close his "Ajax" with the death of the hero, because a new feature is introduced in the denial of his burial, which cannot be neglected. The Greeks considered the burial of the body a pre-requisite service to a happy immortality of the soul; and therefore it would have furnished but little satisfaction to a Grecian audience, had Sophocles closed the tragedy with the death of Ajax. So also in Julius Caesar.

The death of the tyrant is attended with so much excitement, confusion and danger to the conspirators, that if the Play should terminate at this juncture, unity would be violated, and the representation would be exceedingly unsatisfactory. The battle on the plains of Philippi, and Caesar's ghost in the tent of Brutus, are as necessary to the unity of the plot, as the general tendency of the previous action to the final overthrow of the tyrant. Throughout its whole extent, there is unity both in action and in the character. No individual is introduced who is a stranger to the rest, or unnecessary in the plot; and no incidents are presented that are foreign to the subject, and that break the general movement.

5. Another rare gift of Shakespeare's genius, is exhibited in the actors of the Tragedy. It is a difficult matter to make a certain style of language characteristic of a certain speaker, and to fix such an individuality upon characters, that they cannot be mistaken. The great secret of dramatic success is not so much due to the actor; as it is to the author of the drama. The dress, the deportment, and even the countenance, of the stage-player should always be true to the original character whom he designs to represent. It becomes a dramatic writer, therefore, to study well the characters of his play, to give them an imaginary life and being, and then to bring out these characteristics in the language and movement on the stage. Shakespeare has thus created his actors with wonderful suc-

cess. He first caught the true spirit of the Roman people, and then used such language and conceived such actions as the tyranny and death of Caesar would be likely to provoke.

A study of this Tragedy will give us a far better idea of Roman manners and society at this period than the disconnected accounts of Plutarch. While reading the Play, the characters seem to live and to pass before us; and act follows act in such natural order that the drama may be likened to a vivid painting, in which the actors live and move. Certainly, no other genius has ever lived who could so trifle with human nature, as to call up at his bidding such imaginary, and yet such perfect beings. In *Macbeth*, he deals not only with human, but with spiritual, and with natures that are neither human nor divine. His Witches are curious, both in their language and in their deeds; they are unearthly in their appearance, and yet are on the earth. All evil motives of the human breast, and all extremes of passion, seem to be set forth in that fearful tragedy. In *Julius Caesar*, however, the movement is not so rapid, and the passions do not run so high. Here oppression ripens into a conspiracy, and Caesar falls at the hands of those whose motives are not altogether sinister and impure.

The patriot Brutus first deserves our attention. Liberty and true patriotism are important elements in the plot. As Brutus is the hero of these virtues, he of

course enlists the most interest and is therefore the principal character. Since the hero is entitled to the name of the drama, Shakespeare has frequently been censured for not giving to the Play the title of Brutus, rather than that of Caesar. Various speculations have been made upon this point, but there certainly can be no material difference whether the Play bear the name of the one or the other. The character of Brutus is worthy of all admiration. From the time that he was first enticed into the conspiracy, to his very death, he ever evinces the single purpose to promote the welfare of his country. But in his endeavors to banish tyranny from the land, it may be said that he was too honest to be a conspirator. He is willing to join hands with his colleagues, but does not permit them to pledge by oath the resolution of their fell designs ;—nor does he suffer Mark Antony to fall in the plot simply because he may love Caesar. Whilst the conspiracy is working in his mind, he is uneasy and unsettled in his purpose. The murder of Caesar, and the liberty of his country, was a question which he long debated ; and though he could not reconcile with his conscience a complicity in the former, he still felt it his highest duty in conspiring to bring about the blessings of the latter. His doubt of final success in the conspiracy does not permit him to eat nor to sleep ; and the very reluctance with which he entered into it, clearly shows that the motives of Brutus at least were honest and sincere. His dagger was the last that fell upon the unsuspecting Caesar ;

and when in the plains of Philippi he had thrown himself upon his own sword after the defeat of his arms, his dying words were these :

“Caesar, now be still :

I kill'd not thee with half so good a will.”

Brutus evidently is not as good a conspirator as Cassius. The goodness of his cause, and the sincerity with which he opposed tyranny and injustice, he too fondly considered as sufficient security against the power and cunning which Pompey might exercise by appealing to the feelings of the fickle multitude. Next in importance to Brutus is the subtle Cassius. In this character Shakespeare has succeeded admirably in combining the elements of a cunning conspirator. He is not only subtle and wily, but ever jealous and fearful of the worst. He is irritable in temper, inveterate in his purpose ; but not altogether devoid of patriotism. The motives with which he entered into the conspiracy were of a mixed nature. Not the tyranny of Caesar alone made him the first man to seek his death ; he ever cherished bitter envy against all those who were above him in office and in power. Caesar himself did not like his personal appearance. In the second scene, he exclaims :

“Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look ;

He thinks too much ; such men are dangerous ;—

He reads much ;

He is a great observer, and he looks

Quite through the deeds of men ; he loves no plays,

As thou dost, Antony ; he hears no music ;—

Such men as he be never at heart's ease,
 Whiles they behold a greater than themselves,
 And therefore are they very dangerous."

In the dialogue where Cassius breaks the design of the conspiracy to Brutus, we have an example of the most penetrating sagacity. Cassius acts the part of a mirror, where Brutus by reflection can see his noble qualities. Thus by flattery, he first gains audience, and then seeks to lower the character of Caesar in the estimation of his victim. He convinces Brutus of Caesar's effeminacy by his graphic description of their swimming across the Tiber "once upon a raw and gusty day." The quarrel between Brutus and Cassius, in the fourth Act, has actually been regarded by some critics as a failure in the plot, and a break in the movement of the Play. This is not only ungenerous, but pedantic. The fluctuation of the passions, the mildness of Brutus, and the anger of Cassius, furnish additional evidence of Shakespeare's knowledge of the human heart. A quarrel is certainly nothing unusual among Generals on the eve of a battle. Perhaps the finest description of Homer is that of his quarrel among the leaders in a council of war before the walls of Troy. The character of Cassius is here fully brought out. After his reconciliation with Brutus, he fights bravely and nobly in his defence. Though his motives may have been of a doubtful character in the conspiracy, yet he still possesses a noble mind. In the defeat of the battle, rather than be led in triumph through the streets of Rome, he gives his sword to an

attendant, and bids him strike his heart. He too, like Brutus, attributes the cause of his death to the murder of Caesar. His dying words were these :

“Caesar, thou art avenged,
Even with the sword that killed thee.”

The characters of Caesar and Antony are not so fully developed in the Play, as those of Brutus and Cassius. Antony is a special favorite with Caesar because he is gamesome, and ever ready to minister to the pleasure of the tyrant. His speech over the dead body of Caesar is one of the grandest specimens of eloquence and pathos. The artifice which Antony thus practiced in pandering to the fickleness of the rabble, no doubt, was the cause of the battle in the plains of Philippi. Also the character of Caesar is but poorly drawn. His appearance on the stage is seldom, and when he does appear he has but little to do. Shakespeare has been frequently censured for choosing Caesar as the hero, and making his name the title of the Play. In the first place, however, we cannot be sure that the Tragedy was so entitled by the author ; and even if it was, the imperfect representation of this character may still not be a failure in the plot. It may have been the design of Shakespeare to keep Caesar in the back-ground for the purpose of developing more fully the character of Brutus. It is true that Caesar is very much neglected. His vanity and arrogance are the only features fully set forth. He is brought forward as “the spoilt child of victory,”

and then disappears in the middle of the Play. The character of Antony is also but half delineated ; yet at the same time it is equally true, that the “mighty Julius” had taken a strong hold upon the Poet’s imagination. Throughout his writings he makes no less than twenty-four allusions to this important personage ; and it may be strongly suspected, therefore, that a complete representation of the characters of Caesar and Antony had been reserved for another drama. That this was the design of Shakespeare we have much reason to believe.

There are other characteristics in the Play which must not be neglected. In the very first scene, is a fine picture of human nature, which very often escapes the observation of the reader. The different ranks and dispositions of Roman citizens are faithfully delineated. The puns of the cobbler have ever been indicative of his jolly nature ; and the influence which the Tribunes have always exerted over the commoners, is truly shown by the dispersion of the rabble. Here also is illustrated the nature of the human will. What the impatient Marullus could not accomplish by chiding the rabble, the gentle Flavius easily effected by his persuasive eloquence—illustrating the principle that persuasion exerts a greater influence upon the will, than the command of authority or violence. In the third Act the fickleness of the multitude is still more fully shown by the eloquence of Brutus, and the artifice of Antony.

The two great female characters are also worthy of mention. The impatience of Portia to learn the event of the conspiracy, and the anxiety of Calpurnia for the fate of Caesar, are full of passion, and represent the true features of faithful, loving wives. The bluntness of Casca and the vanity of Cicero are also finely drawn. The distinct individuality which Shakespeare has fixed upon his characters, affords the most valuable proof of the versatility of his genius. Amid the great variety of actors, he still preserves each one distinct from all the rest. The peculiar characteristics of each individual—the manners, disposition, and even the dress and personal appearance—can be gleaned with great clearness from the epithets applied, from the movement on the stage, and from the nervous energy in the language of the Poet.

6. Another feature worthy of notice, is the peculiar language employed in the composition of the Play. In developing the capabilities of the English language, Homer does not sustain a closer relation to the Greek, or Dante to the Italian, than Chaucer and Shakespeare do to the English. Perhaps Chaucer principally developed its capabilities, while Shakespeare gave it respectability and made it popular. The prevalence of the English tongue, therefore, is owing very much to the genius of Shakespeare, and to his improvements upon the language of Chaucer. This may be deduced simply from the nervous energy in the language of Julius Caesar. All the various passions of the human

heart are there clearly defined, and all points of propriety, however insignificant, are carefully noted. A few examples will illustrate. In the very beginning of the Play we have a good example of strict observance to little things. Flavius, in chiding the commoners, uses this language :

“Hence ; home, you idle creatures, get you home.”

In Shakespeare's time the word YOU was used as a term of deference to the person addressed ; and the word THOU was considered as a term of reproach. In speaking to the rabble, the Tribune therefore uses the word THOU, because he means to reproach them. This is evident from the language. Though he addresses them with the term YOU in the first part of his speech, yet this could not be avoided, because YOU is here used in the plural. When, however, he directs his language to a single person, and seeing that the person is a mechanic, he at once reproaches him with the term THOU :

“Speak, what trade art thou ?”

In the following speech of Marullus, this truth is still further brought out :

“Where is thy leathern apron, and thy rule ?
What dost thou with thy best apparel on ?”

He then turns to another citizen, and speaks to him thus :

“You, sir ; what trade are you ?”

Here it is supposed that Marullus does not yet know whom he is addressing ; and from the probability

that he might be speaking to some honorable citizen, he uses the terms YOU and SIR as a mark of reverence. When, however, the Tribunes discover that he is a cobbler of some kind, they at once break out :

“MAR.—But what trade art thou? Answer me directly.

FLAV.—What trade, thou knave? thou naughty knave, what trade?”

Thus throughout the entire Play there is the closest regard for the propriety of language; and though these little things are seldom noticed, and seem of small importance, they furnish strong evidence of the Poet's masterly skill in the proper use of his language.

In addition to this, the language of Shakespeare is strong and expressive, because it is derived chiefly from the Anglo-Saxon. The numerical percentage of words in most of his writings, is about eighty-five per cent. of the Saxon element; and although there be more of the Latin element in his Roman Plays, yet the language in the composition of Julius Caesar has a large majority of Saxon words. A philological commentary on the Play would be exceedingly interesting, but would far exceed our purpose in this essay.

7. To appreciate fully the writings of Shakespeare, we must first study carefully the language and character of the age in which he lived. The manners and morals at the beginning of the seventeenth century were exceedingly coarse, and the English language had by no means attained to that pre-eminence which it now holds over all other tongues of the world. Even the crude style and orthography of his original texts,

must be considered great improvements upon the current language of his day, and the indelicacies with which he is sometimes charged, must be attributed to the existing morals of the different classes which he has designed to represent. Shakespeare is always true to nature. No other genius has ever so closely followed the rising passions of the human breast. Much of his choicest poetry is but a compilation of historical facts. Once only did he lower his genius, in the Play of King Henry VIII, when, in doing the pleasure of the "Virgin Queen," he portrayed the life and character of her father in a light that does great violence to historical truth. The Tragedy of Julius Caesar may be compared to a beautiful plain, wide in extent and still marked in variety. There are many eminences from which a great part of the plot may be seen; but amid these there is one, rising mountain-high—the subject of the theme—upon which the Poet conceived the grand design. There must indeed have been a breadth of genius to cover a plot such as this. Amid all the variety of incidents introduced into the body of the Play, the unity is still preserved throughout its whole extent. The chief wonder and novelty of the Shakesperian Drama consist in the happy representation of Nature and of Truth; and it has well been said that "Shakespeare is but another name for Nature, Poetry, Truth."

